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ABSTRACT

Intended to evoke discussion in the research community about the research trend of the 21st century, this paper provides a broad, general definition of qualitative research that covers the many terms currently used under this heading, and discusses seven issues that the research community should address in some manner: (1) new or fad; (2) too many methodologies; (3) lack of standards for data; (4) questionable samples; (5) contamination of subjects; (6) inability to project findings; and (7) a new philosophy needed. It is noted that the differences in the philosophies of quantitative and qualitative research are great enough to cause open rejection of findings one from the other. The discussion points out that newness or fads are always concepts that attract, but new concepts and fads should be refined and improved upon with use. The paper concludes that a new philosophy of knowledge is perhaps the most important issue, and may well be the last one to be dealt with by researchers. It is suggested that the philosophical approach might be to ask why researchers are asking particular questions, and that the questions themselves may need to be evaluated in qualitative terms. (5 references) (BBM)

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QUALITATIVE RESEARCH METHODOLOGY ISSUES

Orlando, Florida
February 16, 1991
Robert G. George

Current movements suggest that qualitative or ethnographic research will be the major research trend going into the 21st Century. Many researchers, however, are finding it difficult to support these methods of research because of the strong emphasis placed on quatitative research which still influences their thinking.

In order to facilitate communication there needs to be a definition of qualitative research. There appears to be as many qualitative methodologies and definitions as there are authors. A sample of terms follows:

Naturalistic	Ecological Psychology
Phenomenological	Holistic Ethnography
Interpretive	Cognitive Anthropology
Ethnographic	Symbolic Interaction
Field Study	Ethnography of Communication
Case Study	Participant Observation

The above terms do not exhaust the variety of methodologies one encounters in reading. With such a great variety of terms, one general definition for purposes of discussion within the confines of this paper necessarily has to be very broad and general in nature.

Qualitative research requires that the researchers

accept certain philosophical assumptions in accordance with the methodology being used. Moreover, these philosophical assumptions need not be totally objective nor quantitative in nature. The data collected for such research is always verabally oriented, but may also contain numerical data. In fact, it is the verbally oriented data that most clearly separates the realms of quantitative and qualitative.

Qualitative Research Issues

New or Fad: It could be argued that researchers were qualitative in nature long before they were quantitative. In fact the 1930's were the years that ushered in the quantitative people. In fact, early experimental people had trouble getting published. But the quantitative movement was so strong as to push qualitative studies into disfavor at first, and later into disdain by the educational community. Now there has been a movement back to qualitative and the younger researchers are anxiouly joining the throngs of the new wave which is also pulling older researchers away from their prior efforts in order to not be deemed as old fashioned or out of date. In the rush for "newness" creative researchers are coining their own phrases, methodologies, standards, and philosphies. When you think of the years of study by someone like Jane Goodall on her subjects, you can better appreciate the humor in the article by Ray Rist (1980) entitled "Blitzkrieg Ethnography: On the Tranformation of a Method into a Movement." Goodall took years and blitzkrieg took days. Perhaps

there is a rush to create your own qualitative methodology in hopes of attaining a certain immortality.

Too Many Methodologies: If new fields of endeavor become breeding grounds for creative methods, then it should not surprise anyone when the number of methodologies reach a point where research readers become frustrated over the inability to fully grasp the understanding of every new methodology. This does not mean that all research readers understand all quantitative methods, but most of the quantitative methods are readily available for study in textbooks and are rather formal in nature. Many of the new methods of qualitative research are created during or after the completion of the study. Then the next researcher who wishes to duplicate or to incorporate the new methodolgy into his study will be fortunate if he can capture all of the nuances of the new method. It is almost like every qualitative researcher must devote some space to alerting the reader to the researchers' perception of the methodology used in the study. Perhaps time will start to create standards.

Lack of Standards for Data: It would stand to reason that if the basic assumptions, the terms, and the methodologies are not standardized, then you can appreciate that the analysis of data has not been standardized. This does not mean that attempts are not being made to standardize data treatment. In fact, whole books such as the one by Miles and Huberman (1984) have been written dealing with qualitative data analysis. Several textbooks

on research such as McMillan and Schumacher (1989) and Hopkins and Antes (1990) have been written that discuss data collection as a part of the section on qualitative research. But the research community has not established hard and fast rules on analysis. Moreover, the major journals of research have not established any firm guidelines for publication. Some people are concerned that the ability to write persuasively might lead to the acceptance of form over substance.

Questionable Samples: Quantitative researchers have been heard to jokingly say that all of research is a question of sampling. Sampling the literature, sampling the subjects, sampling the data, and perhaps sampling the data to be reported. But lying beneath the surface of the joke is the thought that the researcher is trying to get a "true" representation of the population under study. Accepted methods of sampling, albeit often knowingly violated, are considered to render the best representation of the population. Now comes qualitative research methods that do not place sampling restraints upon the researcher. This is especially true of the sampling of subjects. Hence subjects may or may not be representative of a larger population. The qualitative researcher at this point may be attempting to remind this author that many qualitative researchers do not feel a need to project his findings beyond the immediate subjects under study. That each population, no matter the size, might be the whole of the interest of the researcher.

Contamination of Subjects: Qualitative researchers necessarily are present as an outside or foreign presence. There are various levels of intervention, depending upon the method of qualitative research being done, but whatever the level of presence the question of affecting behavior has to be asked. Would the events of an observed situation unfold in the same manner regardless of the presence of a researcher? I suspect the ability of the researcher would be the major determinent of the level of contamination.

Inability to Project Findings: This brings the reader to a real problem that is basic to all research, the adding of new knowledg to our base of knowledge. Qualitative research can tell you what the current state of affairs is at a particular point in time, but there are limiting conditions in generalizing to other supposedly similar situations. If the researcher and the reader of the research are only interested in a situation for the sake of understanding, then qualitative research is apropos. If, however, that researcher is trying to change behavior or predict behavior he cannot use qualitative research findings. Qualitative research cannot be used to predict behavior under current educational research standards.

A New Philosophy Needed: Finally, the key issue that evades most discussions regarding qualitative and quantitative research is philosophy. There is a definite need to develop a strong philosophy by the researcher before he enters into a qualitative

study. The various qualitative methods require various philosophical backgrounds before embarking upon their use, and the philosophical difference are great enough to cause great differences in the acceptance of findings.

Obviously, the differences in the philosophies of quantitative and qualitative research methods are great enough to cause open rejection of findings one from the other. The findings of Piaget were based upon qualitative research, but none of his writings were accepted until his theories had been tested by quantitative studies in the United States. The question arises: "Were Piaget's theories any less valid when based upon qualitative research methods than when they were posited based upon quantitative methods?" The seeking of truth is not undesireable in any philosophy, but the definition of truth may vary. Using qualitative research will require new ways of viewing knowledge and people.

What will happen as the philosophies of qualitative and quantitative research begin to clash? There is reason to believe that the core of each camp will remain unchanged in their philosophies. That there will be some researchers daring enough to venture back and forth between the two camps is to be expected. But there will also be those charlatans who will use and abuse qualitative research methodologies in hopes of circumventing research standards that appear too rigid or too mathmatical in nature. As O'Conner (1990) pointed out in his paper, "...too often researchers cover over their failure to sort out what they are trying to do by hiding behind the early ambiguity of

qualitative research projects--using the old line "I won't know unti I'm in the field." It appears that it will be the task of the research community to be willing to take the time to consciously read and evaluate qualitative reports with the willingness to separate the charlatans from the serious endeavors.

Summary

What was discussed here today was a list of issues that the research community should address in some manner. Newness or fads are always concepts that attract, but new concepts and fads should be refined and improved upon with use. Several issues presented in this paper should be studied further to see how the research community will deal with them. Certainly standards for data, sample problems, subject contamination, and the use of the findings from qualitative research should be studied for possible refinement.

Perhaps the most important issue, a new philosophy of knowledge, is the one that will be the last to be dealt with by researchers. Researchers are terribly guilty of asking questions just because they think the questions have not been asked before. Perhaps the philosophical approach would ask why the question was asked. Perhaps the questions themselves will need to be evaluated in qualitative terms.

This paper did not offer nor intend to be the definitive statement about qualitative research. This paper was intended to evoke discussion in the research community about the research trend of the twenty-first century.

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